

On Hindusim

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15:02

Today begins my sermon series on World Religions—you voted, I listened, here we go! We'll be starting with the oldest religion—Hinduism—and work our way to the youngest—Islam. Each week I'll share beliefs and practices, history and significant figures, and engage with their shadowy sides. I'll do my best to do each faith justice though I am certainly better versed in some religions than others. We'll begin with Hinduism.

Hinduism's roots go back to around 4000-2500 BCE to a collection of scriptures called the Vedas, considered to have been divinely revealed to sages. The early practice of Hinduism emphasized praise and simple sacrifice. Priests eventually arose, acquired power, and made religious ceremonies more complex. This theme plays out in most religions—leave it to religious professionals to make things complicated![1] But Hinduism has actually always been complex. As Moojan Momen writes in *The Phenomenon of Religion*, "Beyond originating in India and holding the Vedas to be sacred, there is little else that holds the wide diversity of groups that call themselves Hindu together. There is certainly no particular creed, doctrine or practice that is common to all Hindus." [2]

One strand of Hinduism is ritualistic and legalistic, officiated by the Brahmins (the priestly caste), another strand is mystical and philosophical, based on the Upanishads, and then there's the bhakti strand based on love and devotion to deities like Shiva and Vishnu. The diversity of practice and belief within Hinduism is astounding.[3] One question I've heard Pash (my mentor) ask of Hindus is, "Who is your god or goddess?" The responses vary and one girl even told us that she loves Ganesha and Jesus!

Now let's get into Hindu gods and goddesses. The story Brooks read is the Birth of Ganesha. You'll notice that Hindu gods and goddesses are fairly humanized; they experience emotions like anger and pride. Shiva cools down after killing Ganesha; he realizes he made a mistake. He makes amends and breathes new life into him, declaring Ganesha to be Shiva's own son. These are not impersonal and distant deities. You may already know that there's 330 million gods and goddesses in Hinduism. However, Hinduism is not a polytheistic religion where many gods and goddesses are worshiped. Rather, Hindu deities are symbols of Brahman or Ultimate Reality. Brahman is Ultimate Reality and Brahmin is the highest caste in society—spelled with one letter different.

So what is Brahman? Brahman is everything and impersonal—Ultimate Reality just is. Ultimate Reality is a process, a truth, or a state of being rather than God as a divine being like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe.[4] Hinduism is a monistic religion; it highlights oneness, no separation, one reality. Samsara is the Hindu concept of the endless circle of life; reincarnation is linked with the idea of Ultimate Reality as a process. The ultimate goal of your life though is moksha or release/bliss, that one day there will be no more you. This also gets to the concept of Brahman as everything and impersonal. Really, we can think of Brahman like this—we know that there are different kinds of love. You love your spouse or significant other differently than you love your children, your parents, your siblings, your friends. But love is love; it just has many forms and expressions.

Different people experience Ultimate Reality in different ways. The 330 million gods and goddesses in Hinduism are different aspects of Brahman. Devotion to and love for particular gods or goddesses (bhakti) is how you gain merit in your life. Yet Hindus believe that deities are

symbols of Ultimate Reality. We tend to have very linear thinking in Western religions; in Eastern religions like Hinduism the thinking is much more circular.

The existence of millions of deities and yet Hinduism not being polytheistic may be one of the hardest concepts to grasp. Or not. Our Christian theological concept of the Trinity should help—three in one and one in three, somehow it just works. For Hinduism, it's 330 million in one and one in 330 million. At the end of the day you're still dealing with the One, with Ultimate Reality. It reminds me of a Hindu saying from the Rig Veda, "Truth is one; sages call it by various names." [5] This is a beautiful concept.

Because of the diversity of beliefs and practices, because of Brahman allowing for 330 million symbols of Ultimate Reality, there is often a natural openness Hindus have with other religions. It's common in India to go into a classroom and see a three paneled picture of a Hindu god or goddess in the middle and Jesus on one side and the Muslim crescent and star on the other. In the villages where I've been, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians live side by side—their houses are differentiated by the symbols of their faith right near the front door. You just have to pay attention to how you greet people, whether it's "Namaste" or "Salaam-Alaikum."

Though like all religions Hinduism certainly has a shadowy side. While the caste system was originally a way to divide labor, it came to be so embedded within Hinduism that working outside the specific labor designated for your caste or marrying someone from a lower caste continues to be problematic. In India you encounter people whose castes are meant to collect firewood or weave baskets—some of the castes are that specific in what labor its members are expected to perform. When some of the young people in modern India attempt to get an education and do something outside their caste, their families don't always react well. Some parents fear that straying outside your caste for labor or even for marriage will have a negative effect on your karma.

Karma governs your advancement or digression on the wheel of life. It's the law of good and bad deeds, and you decide your own karma. Hinduism has a real reverence for life because of karma. Our friend and driver, Pramod, who is Brahmin (the highest caste), honks his horn constantly at animals that wander into the streets because he doesn't want to inadvertently hit any of them. This means that Pramod honks his horn constantly to avoid cows (who are sacred), dogs, pigs, monkeys, goats, you name it. Gandhi once commented that "the greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated." [6] This is deeply experienced in India. I once asked Pramod what would happen if he ever hit a cow—he looked at me in the rearview mirror and shook his head, saying, "Very bad." But he explained that should that ever happen he would go to a temple and ask a priest to perform a ceremony to cleanse him.

Yet, the treatment of the Untouchables, the Dalit, remains a shadowy side of Hinduism and often doesn't reflect this reverence for life. To combat this reality, Gandhi called people in the lower castes the Harijan or "Children of God." Moreover, one famous movement of the Dalits was under Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar who was Dalit and rose to become India's law minister in 1947. Dr. Ambedkar despaired of the effects of the caste system and eventually led several hundred thousand fellow Untouchables to convert to Buddhism in 1956. [7] In effect he left Hinduism behind because of the caste system.

Theologian and Religion Scholar John Hick describes the shadowy side of Hinduism this way, Hinduism "validates the hierarchal caste system of India, including the relegation of millions to the position of outcasts—an injustice which still lingers despite its official abolition in the 1947 Constitution. Hindu society tolerated the former practice of suttee and still tolerates the continuing cruel persecution and sometimes murder of brides whose dowry is deemed insufficient." [8] You still read stories about brides being killed when they can't meet the

expectations of the husband's family, and you read about Dalits being killed for supposed offenses that should no longer be punishable in the first place.

However, there are hopeful signs. To even have young people questioning the assigned labor of their castes and saying that they don't want to just collect firewood or weave baskets for the rest of their lives is extraordinary. And to have parents who do support them and continue to weave their own baskets and collect firewood and somehow manage to scrape enough money to send their children to school is even more extraordinary. To have more rights and protections than before Indian Independence is certainly a positive sign for those from lower castes, but there is still work to do.

To summarize where we've been, Hinduism originated in India around 4000-2500 BCE and holds the Vedas as its sacred scripture. Strands include ritualistic/legalistic faith ruled over by the Brahmins, philosophical/mystical faith based on the Upanishads, and bhakti based on love and devotion to deities. Brahman is Ultimate Reality and is a process, a truth, or a state of being—this becomes evident in the concept of samsara, the endless circle of life. There are 330 million gods and goddesses in Hinduism but it's not polytheistic. The deities are symbols of one Ultimate Reality—think about it as love in its many forms, yet love is love. From the Rig Veda we hear, "Truth is one; sages call it by various names." [9]

Hindus often have a natural openness to other faiths because of the diversity of their own practices and beliefs and a deeply felt reverence for all life, including animals. The caste system is embedded within Hinduism and reflects a shadowy side, including the treatment of the Dalits. But people like Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar questioned the caste system and progress is being made "slowly, slowly" as they say in India to make the reverence for all life truly experienced by every being. And that, my friends, is Hinduism and it's all I got today. Amen.

[1] Some of this sermon is from Dr. Jeffrey Pugh, Introduction to Religious Studies Class Notes, Elon University, Fall 2004

[2] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 8-9.

[3] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 8-9.

[4] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 33.

[5] Rig Veda.

[6] Mahatma Gandhi quote, *Brainy Quote*.

[7] Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*, 159.

[8] John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, Eds. *The Myth of X Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, 29.

[9] Rig Veda